

# The Emperor's Amulet—Another Ling Ti Story—By H. Bedford Jones

## CHRISTMAS EVE AT PILOT BUTTE

(Continued from Fourth Page.)

JIM HANEY stood in the street outside the house of mourning and inspected his enemy with a grim smile.

"Smallpox," he said curtly. "Going in with me, Benson?"

Benson, who was one of the biggest curio dealers and agents in China, shook his head. Only the glimmer in his short-sighted eyes betrayed his vivid hatred of Jim Haney. He was a rather small man, soft-spoken, very deadly, allied with all the forces of graft and evil in China.

"The game isn't worth the candle," he answered.

Haney regarded him with that same thin, dangerous smile on his bronzed hatchet face. The two men stood in a side street of Cheng-tu. Somewhere in or near this city, 1,500 miles from the coast, were a number of objects recently taken from the grave of the Emperor Ling Ti of the Han dynasty—objects which, from an historical and artistic standpoint of value, were worth their weight in rubies to any collector or museum.

One of those objects had been in the possession of the man who had just died of smallpox.

"One word, Benson," said Haney slowly. "You're a clever devil. The mandarin here is working for you. You'd cheerfully pay high to have me killed. Now, Benson, you're too slick to give me any excuse for coming to you and putting a bullet into your ugly hide—but you look out! All I want is the excuse!"

Benson produced a cigarette and lighted it. He knew that Jim Haney would shoot him if given an excuse.

Haney had a reputation for keeping his word—but Benson was a man who never lost his head. So now he refused to let himself be snared into saying anything. Haney was only talking from suspicion, anyway.

"You have gone into partnership with Topit, haven't you?" Benson inquired casually.

"I have," snapped Haney. "And we mean to get the whole Ling Ti outfit."

Benson smiled, waved his cigarette with an assurance that maddened Haney, and responded:

"There's one piece you won't get—nobody will get it! That's the piece in there, the tongue-amulet of Ling Ti. It's been lost. The man is dead."

"You're such a cursed liar I'd hate to believe you," said Haney sourly. "Then go in and ask."

HANEY turned on his heel and strode into the house of mourning. Benson glanced after him with a vivid gleam in his eyes, then shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

A few moments later Jim Haney came from the house, frowningly.

After all, Benson had told him the truth—probably had discovered it through the local mandarin or from official sources. So far as the emperor's amulet had disappeared some days previously while the man lay sick. Now the man was dead and the amulet was gone.

"Tough luck," murmured Haney. "Old Topit will throw a fit when he finds it's been lost. One of Benson's crooks may have stolen it—but I rather think not."

He slowly retraced his steps through the crowded streets to the house of old Kiang, the fur merchant, where his friend and partner, Topit, awaited him. So far as the emperor's amulet was concerned, there seemed to be a complete checkmate.

In the Huo-tau-ku, or street of bookshops, a naked little yellow boy was playing with a peculiar object which he had picked from a garbage pile in the gutter.

This plaything appeared to be a dead cicada, about two inches in length, of a beautiful transparent leaf-green. The boy had inserted a cord through a hole in the nose, and drew the cicada after him by the cord. It was a very pretty plaything.

A poor scholar, who was earnest enough but more ignorant than his title justified, was sitting in contemplation when the boy passed him. Ignorant or clever, scholars are scholars the world over. This yellow man with the horn spectacles saw what the boy was playing with and realized that no real cicada would last ten minutes at such a game; also, that this cicada seemed to be petrified or carved from stone. He called to the boy, and the cicada changed hands for a matter of two coppers—cash.

Examining his purchase, the scholar found that the cicada really was carved from stone—stone resembling jade. But like no jade that he had ever seen. On the belly were two characters of some ancient script which he could not read. Determining that it was a luck-piece, the scholar tucked it into his girdle and took his accustomed way to the south gate, toward the temple of the famous minister, Chu-ko Liang, where he was wont to study the two memorials of this great man—the memorials which have become classics and sources of political inspiration to China.

Now, there were a number of things about this cicada which the poor scholar did not know and probably never would know, since he was a mere learner of words and not an ethnologist.

In ancient China a body was not embalmed. Instead, it was stuffed with jade—for jade was the essence of the yang, or male principle of the universe, which would keep the body from corruption by the yin or female forces of the earth. This at least was the theory. Even in the present period, also, there was a belief in the resurrection of the dead, and hence into the mouth of the corpse was slipped a bit of jade carved in the shape of a cicada. The cicada, like the beetle of the Egyptians, was a symbol of the resurrection, and the jade cicada laid on the tongue of a dead man was an amulet to guide him to the new life.

Leaving the south gate, the scholar passed on to the group of walled temples just outside the city. Entering these by the main gateway on the south, the scholar quickly went to the third and innermost gateway and found himself in the temple of the great generalissimo.

With all the awful concentration of a scholar, he ignored the gardens, the lotus and the arbor; he went straight to the hall, with its bronze beams brought by Chu-ko Liang from the burning of Lu-chang, with its mag-

nificent pictures and poems left there by great artists through hundreds of years as memorials. Instead of these things, the scholar seated himself before the stones of the outer walls, upon which were inscribed the political testaments of the statesman, and set himself to study and contemplate and reflect. The scholar was doubtless improving his soul, but he was killing a tremendous amount of time in doing it.

Sometime afterward the pangs of hunger apprised the scholar that he had not eaten. His lunch money had gone to buy a luck-piece. He took the cicada from his girdle and inspected it critically; in view of the absence of lunch, he did not now care so much for the thing.

A man of clinking coins sharply roused the scholar. He glanced up and saw the mandarin, the first man took it, divided it into two portions, and into each portion firmly

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"He will buy it. He deals in such things."

"True." The more astute robber scratched his nose reflectively. "But, remember, there is a mandarin in the yamen. Beyond doubt, the mandarin will take all the money that the white man should pay us."

"Ah! Quite true," assented the other. "Stay! Is there not another white man living at the Tu-kung temple?"

The first bandit nodded and grinned. "Go to that shop across the street and buy some wax. Then come back."

The second man obeyed, keeping his eye carefully on his comrade. When he returned with the wax the first man took it, divided it into two portions, and into each portion firmly

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